

16. Perictione (texts date late 4th–3rd centuries BC, and 3rd–2nd centuries BC)

Introduction

Two works attributed to Perictione have survived in fragments: *On the Harmony of Women* and *On Wisdom*. Differences in language suggest that they were written by two different people. Allen and Waithe identify them as Perictione I and Perictione II.¹ Plato's mother was named Perictione, and Waithe argues that she should be identified as the earlier Perictione, suggesting that similarities between Plato's *Republic* and *On the Harmony of Women* may not be the result of Perictione reading Plato, but the opposite—the son learning philosophy from his mother.² *On the Harmony of Women*, however, is written in Ionic prose with occasional Doric forms. This mixed dialect dates the work to the late fourth or third centuries BC.³ The reference in *On the Harmony of Women* to women ruling suggests the Hellenistic monarchies of the third century BC or later. *On Wisdom* is written in Doric and is partly identical with a work by Archytas of the same name. This work should be dated later, to the third or second centuries BC.⁴ Both the dates of the works and their dialects mean Perictione the mother of Plato could not have written them.

We have then two Pythagorean texts, attributed to otherwise unknown women named Perictione who should be dated perhaps one hundred years apart. The texts themselves are very different in content. *On the Harmony of Women* is directed to women, and reiterates the important Pythagorean principal of moderation. It discusses the duty of a woman to her husband and marriage,⁵ and to her parents, providing a practical expression of Pythagoreanism. The link she makes between chastity and proper dress, criticising women for dressing up, has a long history.⁶ As Perictione describes the luxury clothes, cosmetics and jewellery that women should not wear, we gain an impression of what was fashionable at the time. *On Wisdom* is more theoretical. It offers a philosophical definition of wisdom, and is not directed towards women.

Perictione I

On the Harmony of Women

1.

It is necessary to consider the harmonious woman full of intelligence and moderation. For it is necessary for a soul to be extremely perceptive regarding virtue to be just and brave and intelligent and well decorated with self-sufficiency and hating baseless opinion. For from this there comes great benefit for a woman, for herself as well as her husband and children and her house, often too for her city, if such a woman rules cities and peoples, as we see in kingdoms. So when she rules over her desires and passions, she becomes righteous and harmonious, so unlawful lusts will not pursue her, but she will keep hold of her love for her husband and children and entire house. For all women who end up lovers of other men's beds become enemies of everyone in the house, both free and servant. She fabricates lies and deceptions for her husband, and invents false stories about everything for him, so she alone may seem to provide good will and rule the house although she loves laziness. From this

there comes disaster for everyone, and it falls upon her as well as her husband. This is enough said about this.

But one must also lead the body to natural amounts of food and clothing and washing and anointing and hairstyles and jewellery made of gold and stones. For all women who eat and drink and dress in everything expensive and wear the things women wear, they are ready for the error of every sin, both of the bed and of the other types of criminal activity. The only necessity is to satisfy hunger and thirst, even if this is done meagrely, and the cold, even if this is done with a goat-skin or rags. It is a great sin to wear clothing from far away and purchased at great cost or from eminent people. It is a great foolishness to wear cloaks excessively and elaborately dyed by sea-baths of shellfish or some other expensive colour. For the body wants neither to shiver nor to be naked (for the sake of decency), and needs nothing else. But human opinion, with its ignorance, rushes into what is empty and excessive. So she will not wear gold nor Indian stone nor any from elsewhere, nor will she plait her hair with great skills, nor anoint herself with Arabian perfumes, nor will she paint her face, whitening or rouging it, nor blacken her eyebrows and eyelashes and treating her grey hair with dyes, nor will she bathe too often. For a woman who seeks these things seeks an admirer of feminine weakness. For beauty from intelligence, and not from these things, pleases women who are well-born. She should not believe that noble birth and wealth and coming from a great city are all that is necessary, nor reputation and the friendship of eminent and royal men. If this is the case, it does no harm, but if not, longing for it does not create it. For thinking about things other than these does not keep a woman from living her life. And even if these things have been allotted to her, do not let her soul chase after great and wonderful things, but let it walk away from them. For they drag her into misfortune and harm rather than help her. With them lie plotting and hatred and torture, so a woman of this kind would not be untroubled.

It is also necessary to revere the gods, confident in happiness, obeying ancestral laws and customs. After them I say honour and revere your ancestors. For they exist and for their offspring act upon everything equally with the gods. With respect to her husband, it is necessary for a woman to live lawfully and honourably, not thinking of her private concerns, but keeping and guarding her marriage. For everything depends on this. She must put up with everything from her husband, even if he is unlucky, if he errs through ignorance or sickness or drunkenness, or lives with other women. For while this error is forgiven in men, it is never forgiven in women, and revenge is taken. So while a wife must keep the law and not be jealous, nor bear any anger, meanness, criticism, jealousy, badness or anything else that is a part of his character. She should be prudent and arrange everything just as he likes it. For when a woman is dear to her husband and acts honourably towards him, harmony rules and loves the whole house and makes outsiders well disposed towards the house. But when a woman is not dear to her husband, she does not want to see her house safe, nor her children, nor the servants, nor any of the property, but she calls and prays for complete ruin, as if she were an enemy, and prays for her husband to die as if he were an enemy, so that she may mix with other men, and she hates whoever pleases him.

I think this is how a woman is harmonious: if she is full of intelligence and prudence. For she will benefit not just her husband, but also her children and relatives and slaves and her whole house, and the possessions in it, and friends from her city and foreign friends. And she will keep their house without over-elaborate skill, speaking and hearing good things, and following her husband in the unity of their shared life, serving the friends and relatives whom he praises, and considering sweet and bitter the same things as her husband, so that she is not out of harmony with the whole.

2.

You must not speak ill of your parents nor do them any ill, but obey them in important and minor matters. And in everything that happens to the body and soul both from without and from within, and in war and peace, in sickness and in health, in poverty and wealth, in bad and good repute, in private and public affairs, you must stay with them and never run away, and obey them even in madness. For those of due reverence, this is appropriate and honourable. But if someone should

despise her parents, planning an evil of some sort, she is charged with a sin by the gods, whether she is alive or dead, and she is hated by people, and through her evils she finds a place beneath the earth with the irreverent, in their domain for eternity, put there by the hands of justice and the gods of the underworld, who are appointed as overseers of these acts.

For the sight of your parents is beautiful and divine, and the honouring and care of them too, more so even than the sight of the sun and all the stars, which the heavens wear and revolve, and anything else which someone might think greater through observation. But I think that the gods are not unhappy when they see this happen. And so one must revere parents, whether they are alive or departed and never speak against them, but even if they act irrationally through illness or mistake one must urge them and teach them, and in no way hate them. For there could not be any greater sin and injustice for humans than irreverence of one's parents.

Perictione II

On Wisdom

1.

Mankind has come into being and exists to contemplate the theory of the nature of the whole. To possess this very thing is the function of wisdom, and to contemplate the purpose of existence.

2.

So geometry and arithmetic and other theoretical things and sciences study what exists, but wisdom is concerned with every type of thing that exists. For thus wisdom is concerned with everything that exists, as sight is concerned with everything that can be seen, and hearing with everything that can be heard. But with respect to what has occurred to attributes of all things, some things have happened to everything, some to most things, and some to each thing individually. So while what has happened to everything is in the provenance of wisdom to see and to contemplate, what has happened to most things is in the provenance of science, and what has happened to each thing individually is in the provenance of sciences for each separate thing. And because of this wisdom discovers the principles of all things that exist, natural science for the principles of things that occur in nature, geometry and arithmetic, and music for the principles of quantity and harmony.

So whoever is able to analyse every type of thing by one and the same principle, and in turn from this principle to synthesise and enumerate, this person seems to be wisest and truest, and moreover, to have discovered a beautiful look-out from which he will be able to look out upon god and everything separated from him and arranged in rank and file.

Notes

1. M.E. Waite, *A History of Women Philosophers*, I (Dodrecht; M. Nijhoff, 1987), 32.
2. Ibid, 86-71.
3. H. Thesleff, 'An introduction to the Pythagorean writings of the Hellenistic Period', *Acta Academiae Aboensis, Humaniora* 24.3 (Abo: To akademi, 1961), 17, 113-15.
4. Ibid, 17, 113-15.
5. On this see also Theano 11 (*Letter to Eurydice*) and 13 (*Letter to Nicosrate*).
6. See also the Pythagoreans Melissa, and Phintys; for the tradition of criticising women for using cosmetics see the discussion on Cleopatra, and see Xenophon (*Economics* 10.5-13) and Juvenal (*Satires* 6.457-73, 486-510).